

Either/Or

For other uses, see [Either/Or \(disambiguation\)](#).

Either/Or (Danish: *Enten – Eller*) is the first published work of the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard. Appearing in two volumes in 1843 under the pseudonymous authorship of Victor Eremita (Latin for “victorious hermit”) it outlines a theory of human development in which consciousness progresses from an essentially hedonistic, aesthetic mode to one characterized by ethical imperatives arising from the maturing of human conscience.

Either/Or portrays two life views, one consciously hedonistic, the other based on ethical duty and responsibility. Each life view is written and represented by a fictional pseudonymous author, with the prose of the work reflecting and depending on the life view being discussed. For example, the aesthetic life view is written in short essay form, with poetic imagery and allusions, discussing aesthetic topics such as music, seduction, drama, and beauty. The ethical life view is written as two long letters, with a more argumentative and restrained prose, discussing moral responsibility, critical reflection, and marriage.^[1] The views of the book are not neatly summarized, but are expressed as lived experiences embodied by the pseudonymous authors. The book’s central concern is the primal question asked by Aristotle, “How should we live?”^[2] His book was certainly informed by Epictetus; “Consider first, man, what the matter is, and what your own nature is able to bear. If you would be a wrestler, consider your shoulders, your back, your thighs; for different persons are made for different things. Do you think that you can act as you do and be a philosopher, that you can eat, drink, be angry, be discontented, as you are now? You must watch, you must labor, you must get the better of certain appetites, must quit your acquaintances, be despised by your servant, be laughed at by those you meet; come off worse than others in everything—in offices, in honors, before tribunals. When you have fully considered all these things, approach, if you please—that is, if, by parting with them, you have a mind to purchase serenity, freedom, and tranquillity. If not, do not come hither; do not, like children, be now a philosopher, then a publican, then an orator, and then one of Caesar’s officers. These things are not consistent. You must be one man, either good or bad. You must cultivate either your own reason or else externals; apply yourself either to things within or without you—that is, be either a philosopher or one of the mob.”^[3] His motto comes from Plutarch, “The deceived is wiser than one not deceived.”^[4]

The aesthetic is the personal, subjective realm of ex-

istence, where an individual lives and extracts pleasure from life only for his or her own sake. In this realm, one has the possibility of the highest as well as the lowest. The ethical, on the other hand, is the civic realm of existence, where one’s value and identity are judged and at times superseded by the objective world. In simple terms, one can choose either to remain oblivious to all that goes on in the world, or to become involved. More specifically, the ethic realm starts with a conscious effort to choose one’s life, with a choice to choose. Either way, however, an individual can go too far in these realms and lose sight of his or her true self. Only faith can rescue the individual from these two opposing realms. *Either/Or* concludes with a brief sermon hinting at the nature of the religious sphere of existence, which Kierkegaard spent most of his publishing career expounding upon. Ultimately, Kierkegaard’s challenge is for the reader to “discover a second face hidden behind the one you see”^[5] in him/herself first, and then in others:

The Middle Ages are altogether impregnated with the idea of representation, partly conscious, partly unconscious; the total is represented by the single individual, yet in such a way that it is only a single aspect which is determined as totality, and which now appears in a single individual, who is because of this, both more and less than an individual. By the side of this individual there stands another individual, who, likewise, totally represents another aspect of life’s content, such as the knight and the scholastic, the ecclesiastic and the layman.
Either/Or Part I p. 86-87 Swenson

1 Historical context

After writing and defending his dissertation *On the Concept of Irony with Continual Reference to Socrates* (1841), Kierkegaard left Copenhagen in October 1841 to spend the winter in Berlin. The main purpose of this visit was to attend the lectures by the German philosopher Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling, who was an eminent figure at the time. The lectures turned out to be a disappointment for many in Schelling’s audience, including Mikhail Bakunin and Friedrich Engels, and Kierkegaard described it as “unbearable nonsense”.^[6] During his stay, Kierkegaard worked on the manuscript for *Either/Or*, took daily lessons to perfect his German and attended operas and plays, particularly by Wolfgang

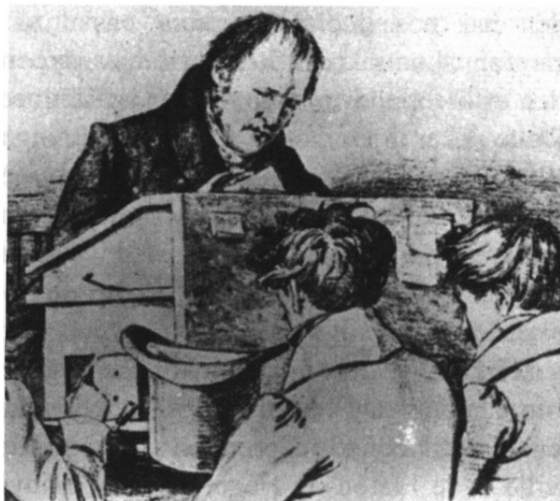
Amadeus Mozart and **Johann Wolfgang von Goethe**. He returned to Copenhagen in March 1842 with a draft of the manuscript, which was completed near the end of 1842 and published in February 1843.

According to a journal entry from 1846, *Either/Or* “was written lock, stock, and barrel in eleven months”,^{[7][8]} although a page from the “Diapsalmata” section in the ‘A’ volume was written before that time.

The title *Either/Or* is an affirmation of **Aristotelian logic**, particularly as modified by **Johann Gottlieb Fichte**^[9] and **Immanuel Kant**. Is the question, “Who am I?” a scientific question or one for the single individual to answer for him or her self?

Fichte wrote in *The Science of Knowledge* “The question has been asked, What *was* I before I became self-conscious? The answer is, I was not at all, for I was not I. The Ego is only in so far as it is conscious of itself. The proposition not A is not A will doubtless be recognized by every one as certain, and it is scarcely to be expected that any one will ask for its proof. If, however, such a proof were possible, it must in our system be deduced from the proposition $A=A$. But such a proof is impossible.”^[10]

- **Law of identity** ($A = A$; a thing is identical to itself)
- **Law of excluded middle** (either A or not-A; a thing is either something or not that thing, no third option)
- **Law of noncontradiction**. (not both A and not-A; a thing cannot be both true and not true in the same instant)



Hegel giving a speech

In **Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel's** work, *The Science of Logic* (1812), Hegel had criticized **Aristotle's** laws of **classical logic** for being static, rather than dynamic and becoming, and had replaced it with his own dialectical logic. Hegel formulated addendums for Aristotle's laws.^{[11][12][13][14][15]}

- Law of identity is inaccurate because a thing is always more than itself
- Law of excluded middle is inaccurate because a thing can be both itself and many others
- Law of non-contradiction is inaccurate because everything in existence is both itself and not itself

Kierkegaard spoke of Hegel's Logic metaphorically in 1844:

Thus when an author entitles the last section of the Logic “**Actuality**,” he thereby gains the advantage of making it appear that in logic the highest has already been achieved, or if one prefers, the lowest. In the meantime, the loss is obvious, for neither logic nor actuality is served by placing actuality in the Logic. Actuality is not served thereby, for **contingency**, which is an essential part of the actual, cannot be admitted within the realm of logic. ... If anyone would take the trouble to collect and put together all the strange pixies and goblins who like busy clerks bring about movement in Hegelian logic a later age would perhaps be surprised to see that what are regarded as discarded witticisms once played an important role in logic, not as incidental explanations and ingenious remarks but as masters of movement, which made Hegel's logic something of a miracle and gave logical thought feet to move on, without anyone's being able to observe them. *Concept of Anxiety*, Søren Kierkegaard, Nichol translation, p. 9-10, note 12

Kierkegaard argues that Hegel's philosophy dehumanized life by denying personal freedom and choice through the neutralization of the 'either/or'. The dialectic structure of becoming renders existence far too easy, in Hegel's theory, because conflicts are eventually mediated and disappear automatically through a natural process that requires no individual choice other than a submission to the will of the Idea or *Geist*. Kierkegaard saw this as a denial of true selfhood and instead advocated the importance of personal responsibility and choice-making.^{[14][15][16]}

2 Structure

The book is the first of Kierkegaard's works written pseudonymously, a practice he employed during the first half of his career.^{[17][18]} In this case, four pseudonyms are used:

- “**Victor Eremita**” - the fictional compiler and editor of the texts, which he claims to have found in an antique **escritoire**.

- “A” - the moniker given to the fictional author of the first text (“Either”) by Victor Eremita, whose real name he claims not to have known.
- “Judge Vilhelm” - the fictional author of the second text (“Or”).
- “Johannes” - the fictional author of a section of ‘Either’ titled “The Diary of a Seducer” and *Cordelia* his lover.^[1]

3 Either

The first volume, the “Either”, describes the “aesthetic” phase of existence. It contains a collection of papers, found by ‘Victor Eremita’ and written by ‘A’, the “aesthete.”^{[6][15]}

The aesthete, according to Kierkegaard’s model, will eventually find himself in “despair”, a psychological state (explored further in Kierkegaard’s *The Concept of Anxiety* and *The Sickness Unto Death*) that results from a recognition of the limits of the aesthetic approach to life. Kierkegaard’s “despair” is a somewhat analogous precursor of existential angst. The natural reaction is to make an eventual “leap” to the second phase, the “ethical,” which is characterized as a phase in which rational choice and commitment replace the capricious and inconsistent longings of the aesthetic mode. Ultimately, for Kierkegaard, the aesthetic and the ethical are both superseded by a final phase which he terms the “religious” mode. This is introduced later in *Fear and Trembling*.

3.1 Diapsalmata

The first section of *Either* is a collection of many tangential aphorisms, epigrams, anecdotes and musings on the aesthetic mode of life. The word ‘diapsalmata’ is related to ‘psalms’, and means “refrains”. It contains some of Kierkegaard’s most famous and poetic lines, such as “What is a poet?”, “Freedom of Speech” vs. “Freedom of Thought”, the “Unmovable chess piece”, the tragic clown, and the laughter of the gods.^[19]

If one were to read these as written they would show a constant movement from the outer poetic experience to the inner experience of humor. The movement from the outer to the inner is a theme in Kierkegaard’s works.

3.2 The Immediate Stages of the Erotic, or Musical Erotic

An essay discussing the idea that music expresses the spirit of sensuality. ‘A’ evaluates Mozart’s *The Marriage of Figaro*, *The Magic Flute* and *Don Giovanni*, as well as Goethe’s *Faust*. ‘A’ has taken upon himself the task of proving, through the works of Mozart, that “music is



Don Juan and the Commander^[20]

a higher, or more spiritual art, than language”. During this process he develops the three stages of the musical-erotic.^[21]

Here he makes the distinction between a seducer like Don Juan, who falls under aesthetic categories, and Faust, who falls under ethical categories. “The musical Don Juan enjoys the satisfaction of desire; the reflective Don Juan enjoys the deception, enjoys the cunning.” Don Juan is split between the esthetic and the ethical. He’s lost in the multiplicity of the “1,003 women he has to seduce”.^[22] Faust seduces just one woman. Kierkegaard is writing deep theology here. He’s asking if God seduces 1,003 people at one time or if he seduces one single individual at a time in order to make a believer. He also wrote about seducers in this way:

Achim v. Arnim tells somewhere of a seducer of a very different style, a seducer who falls under ethical categories. About him he uses an expression which in truth, boldness, and conciseness is almost equal to Mozart’s stroke of the bow. He says he could so talk with a woman that, if the devil caught him, he could wheedle himself out of it if he had a chance to talk with the devil’s grandmother. This is the real seducer; the aesthetic interest here is also different, namely: how, the method. There is evidently something very pro-

found here, which has perhaps escaped the attention of most people, in that Faust, who reproduces Don Juan, seduces only one girl, while Don Juan seduced hundreds; but this one girl is also, in an intensive sense, seduced and crushed quite differently from all those Don Juan has deceived, simply because Faust, as reproduction, falls under the category of the intellectual. The power of such a seducer is speech, i.e., the lie.

A few days ago I heard one soldier talking to another about a third who had betrayed a girl; he did not give a long-winded description, and yet his expression was very pithy: "He gets away with things like that by lies and things like that." Such a seducer is of quite a different sort from Don Juan, is essentially different from him, as one can see from the fact that he and his activities are extremely unmusical, and from the aesthetic standpoint come within the category of the interesting. The object of his desire is accordingly, when one rightly considers him aesthetically, something more than the mere sensuous. But what is this force, then by which Don Juan seduces? It is desire, the energy of sensuous desire. He desires in every woman, the whole of womanhood, and therein lies the sensuously idealizing power with which he at once embellishes and overcomes his prey. The reaction beautifies and develops the one desired, who flushes in enhanced beauty by its reflection. As the enthusiast's fire with seductive splendor illumines even those who stand in a casual relation to him, so Don Juan transfigures in a far deeper sense every girl, since his relation to her is an essential one. Therefore all finite differences fade away before him in comparison with the main thing: being a woman. He rejuvenates the older woman into the beautiful middle age of womanhood; he matures the child almost instantly; everything which is woman is his prey (*pur che' porti la gonella, voi sapete quel che' fa*).

Either/Or Part 1, Søren

Kierkegaard, 1843, Swenson, 1970
[1944], p. 98-99

Kierkegaard believed the spiritual element was missing in Don Juan's and in Faust's view of life. He wrote the following in 1845.

Assume that a woman as beautiful as the concubine of a god and as clever as the Queen of Sheba were willing to squander the *summa summarum* [sum of sums] of her hidden and manifest charms on my unworthy cleverness; assume that on the same evening one of my peers invited me to drink wine with him and clink glasses and smoke tobacco in student fashion and enjoy the old classics together-I would not ponder very long. What prudery, they shout. Prudery? I do not think that it is so. In my opinion, all this beauty and cleverness, together with love and the eternal, have infinite worth, but without that a relation between man and woman, which nevertheless essentially wants to express this, is not worth a pipe of tobacco. In my opinion, when falling in love is separated from this-please note, the eternal from falling in love-one can properly speak only of what is left over, which would be the same as talking like a midwife, who does not beat about the bush, or like a dead and departed one who, "seared to spirit," does not feel stimulus. It is comic that the action in the *vaudeville* revolves around four marks and eight shillings, and it is the same here also. When falling in love-that is, the eternal in falling in love-is absent, then the erotic, despite all possible cleverness, revolves around what becomes nauseating because spirit *qua* spirit wants to have an ambiguous involvement with it. It is comic that a mentally disordered man picks up any piece of granite and carries it around because he thinks it is money, and in the same way it is comic that Don Juan has 1,003 mistresses, for the number simply indicates that they have no value. Therefore, one should stay within one's *means* in the use of the word "love." When there is need, one should not shy away from using descriptive terms that both the *Bible* and *Holberg* use, but neither should one be so superclever that one believes that cleverness is the constituting factor, for it constitutes anything but an erotic relationship. Søren Kierkegaard, *Stages on Life's Way*, Hong, p. 292-293

3.3 Essays read before the Symparane-kromenoi

The next three sections are essay lectures from 'A' to the 'Symparane-kromenoi', a club or fellowship of the dead



Antigone and Polynices

who practice the art of writing posthumous papers.

The first essay, which discusses ancient and modern tragedy, is called the “Ancient Tragical Motif as Reflected in the Modern”. Once again he is writing about the inner and the outer aspects of tragedy. Can remorse be shown on a stage? What about sorrow and pain? Which is easier to portray?^[23] He also discusses guilt, sin, fear, compassion, and responsibility in what can be considered a foreshadowing of *Fear and Trembling* and *Repetition*.^[24] He then writes a modern interpretation of *Antigone* which leads into *The Concept of Anxiety*.

Draw nearer to me, dear brothers of Symparanekromenoi; close around me as I send my tragic heroine out into the world, as I give the daughter of sorrow a dowry of pain as a wedding gift. She is my creation, but still her outline is so vague, her form so nebulous, that each one of you is free to imagine her as you will, and each one of you can love her in your own way. She is my creation, her thoughts are my thoughts, and yet it is as if I had rested with her in a night of love, as if she had entrusted me with her deep secret, breathed it and her soul out in my embrace, and as if in the same moment she changed before me, vanished, so that her actuality could only be traced in the mood that remained, instead of the converse being true, that my mood brought her forth to a greater and greater actuality. I placed the words in her mouth, and yet it is as if I abused her confidence; to me, it is as if she stood reproachfully behind me, and yet it is the other way around, in her mystery she becomes ever more and more visible. She is my possession, my lawful possession, and yet sometimes it is as if I had slyly insinuated myself into her confidence, as if I must constantly look behind me to find her, and yet, on the contrary, she lies constantly before me, she constantly comes into existence only as I bring her forth. She is called Antigone. This name I retain from the ancient

tragedy, which for the most part I will follow, although, from another point of view, everything will be modern. *Either/Or Part I*, Swenson, p. 151

That which in the Greek sense affords the tragic interest is that Oedipus’ sorrowful destiny re-echoes in the brother’s unhappy death, in the sister’s collision with a simple human prohibition; it is, so to say, the after effects, the tragic destiny of Oedipus, ramifying in every branch of his family. This is the totality which makes the sorrow of the spectator so infinitely deep. It is not an individual who goes down, it is a small world, it is the objective sorrow, which, released, now advances in its own terrible consistency, like a force of nature, and Antigone’s unhappy fate, an echo of her fathers, is an intensified sorrow. When, therefore, Antigone in defiance of the king’s prohibition resolves to bury her brother, we do not see in this so much a free action on her part as a fateful necessity, which visits the sins of the fathers upon the children. There is indeed enough freedom of action in this to make us love Antigone for her sisterly affection, but in the necessity of fate there is also, as it were, a higher refrain which envelops not only the life of Oedipus but also his entire family. *Either/Or Part I*, Swenson, p. 154

The second essay, called “Shadowgraphs: A Psychological Pastime”, discusses modern heroines, including Mozart’s Elvira and Goethe’s Gretchen (Margaret). He studies how desire can come to grief in the single individual.

It is this reflective grief which I now propose to bring before you and, as far as possible, render visible by means of some pictures. I call these sketches Shadowgraphs, partly by the designation to remind you at once that they derive from the darker side of life, partly because like other shadowgraphs they are not directly visible. When I take a shadowgraph in my hand, it makes no impression upon me, and gives me no clear conception of it. Only when I hold it up opposite the wall, and now look not directly at it, but at that which appears on the wall, am I able to see it. So also with the picture which I wish to show here, an inward picture which does not become perceptible until I see it through the external. This external is perhaps quite unobtrusive but not until I look through it, do I discover that inner picture which I desire to show you, an inner picture too delicately drawn to be outwardly visible, woven as it is of the tenderest moods of the soul. If I look at

a sheet of paper, there may seem to be nothing remarkable about it, but when I hold it up to the light and look through it, then I discover the delicate inner inscriptions, too ethereal, as it were, to be perceived directly. Turn your attention then, dear Symparanekromenoi, to this inner picture; do not allow yourselves to be distracted by the external appearance, or rather, do not yourselves summon the external before you, for it shall be my task constantly to draw it aside, in order to afford you a better view of the inner picture. *Either/Or Part I*, Swenson, p. 171

Historically he's asking if one person can bring the inner life of a historical figure into view. Psychologically he's asking if psychologists can really give an accurate picture of the inner world. Religiously he's asking if one person can accurately perceive the inner world of the spirituality of another person. He conducts several thought experiments to see if he can do it.

The third essay, called "The Unhappiest One", discusses the hypothetical question: "who deserves the distinction of being unhappier than everyone else?" Kierkegaard has progressed from a search for the highest^[25] to the search for the lowest.^[26] Now he wants to find the unhappy person by looking once again to the past. Is it Niobe, or Job, or the father of the prodigal son, or is it Periander,^[27] Abraham, or Christ? This is, of course, about the new science of anthropology, which digs up everyone and tells the world if the people were happy or sad.

3.4 The First Love

In this volume Kierkegaard examines the concept of 'First Love' as a pinnacle for the aestheticist, using his idiosyncratic concepts of 'closedness' (*indesluttethed* in Danish) and the 'demonic' (*demoniske*) with reference to Eugène Scribe. Scribe wanted to create a template for all playwrights to follow. He insisted that people go to plays to escape from reality and not for instruction.^[28] Kierkegaard is against any template in the field of literature or of Christianity. He was against systematizing anything in literature because the system brings the artist to a stop and he or she just settles down in the system. Kierkegaard has been writing against reading about love instead of discovering love. Scribe's play is 16 pages long^[29] and Kierkegaard writes a 50 page review of the book. He wrote against the practice of reading reviews instead of the actual books themselves.

In his review he goes to the play himself and sees his lover at a play called *First Love*; for him this is a sign, like a four leaf clover, that she must be the one. But confusion sets in for the poor girl because of mistaken identity. She is unable to make up her mind about love and says, "The first love is the true love, and one loves only once." But Kierkegaard says this is *sophistry* "because

the category first, is at the same time a qualitative and a numerical category." Her first impression of love, when she was eight, has become decisive for her whole life.^[30] Now she can love only to a certain degree because she's comparing each new experience with the past experience. Kierkegaard discussed this again in 1845.

take a little pity on me. I myself feel what a sorry figure I cut these days when even the girls die as passionately of love as Falstaff passionately falls in the battle with Percy-and then rise up again, vigorous and nubile enough to drink to a fresh love. Bravo! And by this kind of talk, or rather, by a life that justifies talking this way, I would think-provided that one person can benefit another at all-I would think that I have benefited my esteemed contemporaries more than by writing a paragraph in the system. What it depends on is the positing of life's pathological elements absolutely, clearly, legibly, and powerfully, so that life does not come to be like the system, a secondhand store where there is a little of everything, so that one does everything to a certain degree, so that one does not tell a lie but is ashamed of oneself, does not tell a lie and then, erotically speaking, romantically dies of love and is a hero, but does not stop at that or just lie there but gets up again and goes further and become a hero of novels of everyday life, and goes further yet and becomes frivolous, witty, a hero in Scribe. Imagine eternity in a confusion like that; imagine a man like that on Judgment Day; imagine hearing the voice of God, "Have you believed?" Imagine hearing the answer, "Faith is the immediate; one should not stop with the immediate as they did in the Middle Ages, but since Hegel one goes further; nevertheless one admits that it is the immediate and that the immediate exists but anticipates a new treatise." Søren Kierkegaard, *Stages on Life's Way*, 1845, Hong, p. 291-292

3.5 Crop Rotation: An Attempt at a Theory of Social Prudence

In agriculture, one rotates the crop to keep the soil fertile and full of nutrients. Crop Rotation in *Either/Or* refers to the aesthete's need to keep life "interesting", to avoid both boredom and the need to face the responsibilities of an ethical life.

3.6 Diary of a Seducer

Written by 'Johannes the Seducer', this volume illustrates how the aesthete holds the "interesting" as his highest

value and how, to satisfy his *voyeuristic* reflections, he manipulates his situation from the boring to the interesting. He will use irony, artifice, caprice, imagination and arbitrariness to engineer poetically satisfying possibilities; he is not so much interested in the act of seduction as in willfully creating its interesting possibility.

Kierkegaard has this seducer speak again in *Stages on Life's Way*^[31] where he explores some of the possibilities and then once more where he tries to explain that misunderstanding can be the root of the unity of the tragic and the comic. "Anyone who, when he is twenty years old, does not understand that there is a *categorical imperative* — Enjoy — is a fool, and anyone who does not start doing it is a *Christiansfelder*. Our young friend will always remain on the outside. Victor^[32] is a fanatic; Constantin has paid too much for his *intellect*; the Fashion Designer is a madman. All four of you after the same girl will turn out to be a fizzle! Have enough fanaticism to idealize, enough appetite to join in the jolly conviviality of desire, enough understanding to break off in exactly the same way death breaks off, enough rage to want to enjoy it all over again — then one is the favorite of the gods and of the girls."^[33]

Kierkegaard has the category of choice and the esthetic as well as the ethical. Both can choose to love each other but the "how" of love is what Kierkegaard is getting at.

The *tragic* is that the two lovers don't understand each other; the *comic* is that two who do not understand each other love each other. That such a thing can happen is not inconceivable, for erotic love itself has its dialectic, and even if it were unprecedented, the construction, of course, has the absolute power to construct imaginatively. When the *heterogeneous* is sustained the way I have sustained it, then both parties are right in saying that they love. Love itself has an ethical and an esthetic element. She declares that she loves and has the esthetic element and understands it esthetically; he says that he loves and understands it ethically. Hence they both love and love each other, but nevertheless it is a misunderstanding. *Stages on Life's Way*, Hong (Letter to the Reader) p. 421

4 Or

The second volume represents the ethical stage. Victor Eremita found a group of letters from a retired Judge Vilhelm or William, another pseudonymous author, to 'A', trying to convince 'A' of the value of the ethical stage of life by arguing that the ethical person can still enjoy aesthetic values. The difference is that the pursuit of pleasure is tempered with ethical values and responsibilities.

- "The Aesthetic Validity of Marriage": The first letter is about the aesthetic value of *marriage* and defends marriage as a way of life.
- "Equilibrium between the Aesthetic and the Ethical in the Development of Personality": The second letter concerns the more explicit ethical subject of choosing the good, or one's self, and of the value of making binding life-choices.
- "Ultimatum": The volume ends in a discourse on the Upbuilding in the Thought that: against God we are always in the wrong.^[34] His spiritual advice for "A" and "B" is that they make *peace* with each other. Here Kierkegaard quotes from the *Gospel of Luke* Chapter 19 verses 42 to the end for this *discourse*.

And when he drew near and saw the city, he wept over it, saying: Would that even today you knew the things that make for peace! But now they are hid from your eyes. For the days shall come upon you when your enemies will cast up a bank about you and surround you and hem you in on every side, and then will dash you to the ground and your children within you will not leave one stone upon another in you, because you did not know the time of your visitation. And he entered the temple and began to drive out those who sold, saying not them: It is written, "My house is a house of prayer," but you have made it a den of robbers. And he taught daily in the temple. But the chief priests and the scribes and the principal men of the people sought to destroy him, but they did not find what they should do, for all the people clung to him and listened to him. *Either/Or* Part 2, Hong, p. 341 (Luke 19:41-48)

It's human nature to look to external forces when faced with our own inadequacies but the ethicist is against this. Comparison is an esthetic exercise and has nothing to do with ethics and religion. He says, "Let each one learn what he can; both of us can learn that a person's unhappiness never lies in his lack of control over external conditions, since this would only make him completely unhappy."^[35] He also asks if a person "absolutely in love can know if he is more or less in love than others."^[36] He completes this thought later in his *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* and expands on looking inward in *Practice in Christianity*.

The ethical and the ethical-religious have nothing to do with the comparative. ... All *comparison* delays, and that is why mediocrity likes it so much and, if possible, traps everyone

in it by its despicable friendship among mediocrities. A person who blames others, that they have corrupted him, is talking nonsense and only informs against himself. *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* p. 549-550

Comparison is the most disastrous association that love can enter into; comparison is the most dangerous acquaintance love can make; comparison is the worst of all *seductions*. Søren Kierkegaard, *Works of Love* (1847), Hong, p. 186

Lord Jesus Christ, our foolish minds are weak; they are more than willing to be drawn and there is so much that wants to draw us to itself. There is pleasure with its seductive power, the multiplicity with its bewildering distractions, the moment with its infatuating importance and the conceited laboriousness of busyness and the careless time-wasting of light-mindedness and the gloomy brooding of heavy-mindedness—all this will draw us away from ourselves to itself in order to deceive us. But you, who are the truth, only you, Savior and Redeemer, can truly draw a person to yourself, which you have promised to do—that you will draw all to yourself. Then may God grant that by repenting we may come to ourselves, so that you, according to your Word, can draw us to yourself—from on high, but through lowliness and abasement. Søren Kierkegaard, *Practice in Christianity*, 1850 p.157 Hong

Introducing the ethical stage it is moreover unclear if Kierkegaard acknowledges an ethical stage without *religion*. Freedom seems to denote freedom to choose the will to do the right and to denounce the wrong in a secular, almost *Kantian* style. However, remorse (*angeren*) seems to be a religious category specifically related to the Christian concept of deliverance.^[37] Moreover, Kierkegaard is constant in his point of view that each single individual can become conscious of a higher self than the externally visible human self and embrace the spiritual self in “an eternal understanding”.

In a spiritual sense that by which a person gives birth is the formative striving of the will and that is within a person's own power. What are you afraid of then? After all, you are not supposed to give birth to another human being; you are supposed to give birth only to yourself. And yet I am fully aware that there is an earnestness about this that shakes the entire soul; to become conscious in one's eternal validity is a moment that is more significant than everything else in the world. It is as if you were

captivated and entangled and could never escape either in time or in eternity; it is as if you lost yourself, as if you ceased to be; it is as if you would repent of it the next moment and yet it cannot be undone. It is an earnest and significant moment when a person links himself to an eternal power for an eternity, when he accepts himself as the one whose remembrance time will never erase, when in an eternal and unerring sense he becomes conscious of himself as the person he is. Judge Vilhelm, *Either/Or II* p. 206 Hong 1987

The self that is the objective is not only a personal self but a social, a civic self. He then possesses himself as a task in an activity whereby he engages in the affairs of life as this specific personality. Here his task is not to form himself but to act, and yet he forms himself at the same time, because, as I noted above, the ethical individual lives in such a way that he is continually transferring himself from one stage to another. Søren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or II* p. 262-263

A Providence watches over each man's wandering through life. It provides him with two guides. The one calls him forward. The other calls him back. They are, however, not in opposition to each other, these two guides, nor do they leave the wanderer standing there in doubt, confused by the double call. Rather the two are in eternal understanding with each other. For the one beckons forward to the Good, the other calls man back from evil. The two guides call out to a man early and late, and when he listens to their call, then he finds his way, then he can know where he is, on the way. Because these two calls designate the place and show the way. Of these two, the call of remorse is perhaps the best. For the eager traveler who travels lightly along the way does not, in this fashion, learn to know it as well as a wayfarer with a heavy burden. The one who merely strives to get on does not learn to know the way as well as the remorseful man. The eager traveler hurries forward to the new, to the novel, and, indeed, away from experience. But the remorseful one, who comes behind, laboriously gathers up experience. Søren Kierkegaard, *Purity of Heart is to Will One Thing*, from *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits* (1846), Steere translation 1938 p. 39-40

5 Discourses and sequel

Along with this work, Kierkegaard published, under his own name, *Two Upbuilding Discourses*^[38] on May 16, 1843 intended to complement *Either/Or*, “The Expectancy of Faith” and “Every Good and Every Perfect Gift is from Above”.^[39] Kierkegaard also published another discourse during the printing of the second edition of *Either/Or* in 1849.^[40]

Kierkegaard’s discourse has to do with the difference between wishing and willing in the development of a particular expectancy. “As thought becomes more absorbed in the future, it loses its way in its restless attempt to force or entice an explanation from the riddle.” Expectancy always looks to the future and can hope, but regret, which is what Goethe did in his book *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, closes the door of hope and love becomes unhappy. Kierkegaard points to “faith as the highest” expectancy because faith is something that everyone has, or can have. He says: “The person who wishes it for another person wishes it for himself; the person who wishes it for himself wishes it for every other human being, because that by which another person has faith is not that by which he is different from him but is that by which he is like him; that by which he possesses it is not that by which he is different from others but that by which he is altogether like all.”

The characters in *Either/Or* believe everyone is alike in that everyone has talent or everyone has the conditions that would allow them to live an ethical life. Goethe wanted to love and complained that he couldn’t be loved, but everyone else could be loved. But he wished, he didn’t have an expectancy to work his will to love. Kierkegaard responds to him in this way:

You know that you must not wish-and thereupon he went further. When his soul became anxious, he called to it and said: When you are anxious, it is because you are wishing; anxiety is a form of wishing, and you know that you must not wish-then he went further. When he was close to despair, when he said: I cannot; everyone else can-only I cannot not. Oh, that I had never heard those words, that with my grief I had been allowed to go my way undisturbed-and with my wish. Then he called to his soul and said: Now you are being crafty, for you say that you are wishing and pretend that it is a question of something external that one can wish, whereas you know that it is something internal that one can only will; you are deluding yourself, for you say: Everyone else can-only I cannot. And yet you know that that by which others are able is that by which they are altogether like you-so if it really were true that you cannot, then neither could the others. So you betray not only your own cause but, insofar as

it lies with you, the cause of all people; and in your humbly shutting yourself out from their number, you are slyly destroying their power. Then he went further. After he had been slowly and for a long time brought up under the disciplinarian in this way, he perhaps would have arrived at faith. Søren Kierkegaard, *Two Upbuilding Discourses*, 1843 p. 9-12

The “Ultimatum” at the end of the second volume of *Either/Or* hinted at a future discussion of the religious stage in *The Two Upbuilding Discourses*, “Ask yourself and keep on asking until you find the answer, for one may have known something many times, acknowledged it; one may have willed something many times, attempted it-and yet, only the deep inner motion, only the heart’s indescribable emotion, only that will convince you that what you have acknowledged belongs to you, that no power can take it from you-for only the truth that builds up is truth for you.”^[41] This discussion is included in *Stages on Life’s Way* (1845). The first two sections revisit and refine the aesthetic and ethical stages elucidated in *Either/Or*, while the third section, *Guilty/Not Guilty* is about the religious stage and refers specifically to Goethe’s other book, *The Autobiography of Goethe: Truth and Poetry, from My Own Life* vol 1, 2^[42]

In addition to the discourses, one week after *Either/Or* was published, Kierkegaard published a newspaper article in *Fædrelandet*, titled “Who Is the Author Of *Either/Or*?”, attempting to create authorial distance from the work, emphasizing the content of the work and the embodiment of a particular way of life in each of the pseudonyms. Kierkegaard, using the pseudonym ‘A.F.’, writes, “most people, including the author of this article, think it is not worth the trouble to be concerned about who the author is. They are happy not to know his identity, for then they have only the book to deal with, without being bothered or distracted by his personality.”^[43]

6 Themes

See also: [Philosophy of Søren Kierkegaard](#)

The various essays in *Either/Or* help elucidate the various forms of aestheticism and ethical existence. Both A and Judge Vilhelm attempt to focus primarily upon the best that their mode of existence has to offer.

A fundamental characteristic of the aesthete is *immediacy*. In *Either/Or*, there are several levels of immediacy explored, ranging from unrefined to refined. Unrefined immediacy is characterized by immediate cravings for desire and satisfaction through enjoyments that do not require effort or personal cultivation (e.g. alcohol, drugs, casual sex, sloth, etc.) Refined immediacy is characterized by planning how best to enjoy life aesthetically. The

“theory” of social prudence given in *Crop Rotation* is an example of refined immediacy. Instead of mindless hedonistic tendencies, enjoyments are contemplated and “cultivated” for maximum pleasure. However, both the refined and unrefined aesthetes still accept the fundamental given conditions of their life, and do not accept the responsibility to change it. If things go wrong, the aesthete simply blames existence, rather than one’s self, assuming some unavoidable tragic consequence of human existence and thus claims life is meaningless.^[15] Kierkegaard spoke of immediacy this way in his sequel to *Either/Or*, *Stages on Life’s Way*,

“The esthetic sphere is the sphere of immediacy, the ethical the sphere of requirement (and this requirement is so infinite that the individual always goes bankrupt), the religious the sphere of fulfillment, but, please note, not a fulfillment such as when one fills an alms box or a sack with gold, for repentance has specifically created a boundless space, and as a consequence the religious contradiction: simultaneously to be out on 70,000 fathoms of water and yet be joyful. Just as the ethical sphere is a passageway—which one nevertheless does not pass through once and for all—just as repentance is its expression, so repentance is the most dialectical. No wonder, then, that one fears it, for if one gives it a finger it takes the whole hand. Just as Jehovah in the Old Testament visits the iniquities of the fathers upon the children unto the latest generations, so repentance goes backward, continually presupposing the object of its investigation. In repentance there is the impulse of the motion, and therefore everything is reversed. This impulse signifies precisely the difference between the esthetic and the religious as the difference between the external and the internal.” Søren Kierkegaard, *Stages on Life’s Way*, Hong translation, p. 476-477

Commitment is an important characteristic of the ethicist. Commitments are made by being an active participant in society, rather than a detached observer or outsider. The ethicist has a strong sense of responsibility, duty, honor and respect for his friendships, family, and career.^[15] Judge Vilhelm uses the example of marriage as an example of an ethical institution requiring strong commitment and responsibility. Whereas the aesthete would be bored by the repetitive nature of marriage (e.g. married to one person only), the ethicist believes in the necessity of self-denial (e.g. self-denying unmitigated pleasure) in order to uphold one’s obligations.^[15] Kierkegaard had Judge William speak again in his 1845 book *Stages on Life’s Way*. Here he described the enemies the single individual faces when trying to make a commitment, probability and the outcome.

These is a phantom that frequently prowls

around when the making of a **resolution** is at stake—it is *probability*—a spineless fellow, as dabbler, a Jewish peddler, with whom no freeborn soul becomes involved, a good-for-nothing fellow who ought to be jailed instead of quacks, male and female, since he tricks people out of what is more valuable than money. Anyone who with regard to resolution comes no further, never comes any further than to decide on the basis of probability, is lost for ideality, whatever he may become. If a person does not encounter God in the resolution, if he has never made a resolution in which he had a transaction with God, he might just as well have never lived. But God always does business wholesale, and probability is a security that is not registered in heaven. Thus it is so very important that there be an element in the resolution that impresses officious probability and renders it speechless. There is a phantasm that the person making a resolution chases after the way a dog chases its shadow in the water; it is the *outcome*, a symbol of finiteness, a mirage of perdition—woe to the person who looks to it, he is lost. Just as the person who, if bitten by serpents, looked at the cross in the desert and became healthy, so the person who fastens his gaze on the outcome is bitten by a serpent, wounded by the secular mentality, lost both for time and for eternity. Søren Kierkegaard, *Stages on Life’s Way*, Hong, p. 110

Kierkegaard stresses the “eternal” nature of marriage and says “something new comes into **existence**” through the **wedding ceremony**.^[44] The aesthete doesn’t see it that way. The aesthete makes a “half hour’s **resolution**”^[45] but the ethical person, and especially the religious person, makes the “**good resolution**”.^[46] Someone devoted to pleasure finds it impossible to make this kind of resolution.^[47] The ethical and “Christian religious”^[48] person make the resolution because they have the *will* to have a *true conception of life and of oneself*.^[49] A resolution involves **change** but for the **single individual** this involves only change in oneself. It never means changing the whole world or even changing the other person.^[50]

7 Interpretation

The extremely nested pseudonymity of this work adds a problem of interpretation. A and B are the authors of the work, Eremita is the editor. Kierkegaard’s role in all this appears to be that he deliberately sought to disconnect himself from the points of view expressed in his works, although the absurdity of his pseudonyms’ bizarre Latin names proves that he did not hope to thoroughly conceal his identity from the reader. Kierkegaard’s *Papers* first edition VIII(2), B 81 - 89 explain this method in writing.

On interpretation there is also much to be found in *The Point of View of My Work as an Author*.^[51]

Furthermore, Kierkegaard was a close reader of the aesthetic works of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe and the ethical works of Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel. Each presented a way of living one's life in a different manner. Kierkegaard's writings in this book are close to what Goethe wrote in his Autobiography.

All men of a good disposition feel, with increasing cultivation, that they have a double part to play in the world, -a real one and an ideal one, and in this feeling is the ground of everything noble to be sought. The real part which has been assigned to us we experience but too plainly; with respect to the second, we seldom come to a clear understanding about it. Man may seek his higher destination on earth or in heaven, in the present or in the future, he yet remains on this account exposed to an external wavering, to an influence from without which ever disturbs him, until he once for all makes a resolution to declare that that is right which is suitable to himself. Among the most venial attempts to acquire something higher, to place oneself on an equality with something higher, may be classed the youthful impulse to compare oneself with the characters in novels. This is highly innocent, and whatever may be urged against it, the very reverse of mischievous. It amuses at times when we should necessarily die of *ennui*, or grasp at the recreation of passion. How often is repeated the litany about the mischief of novels-and yet what misfortune is it if a pretty girl or a handsome young man put themselves in the place of a person who fares better or worse than themselves? Is the citizen life, worth so much? or do the necessities of the day so completely absorb the man, that he must refuse every beautiful demand which is made upon him? The cold world, which judges only from one side, is not to be blamed if it sets down as ridiculous and objectionable all that comes forward as imaginary, but the thinking connoisseur of mankind must know how to estimate it according to its worth.

- *The Autobiography of Johann Goethe*, published 1811-1833, p. 400-401^[52]

7.1 Existential interpretation

A common interpretation of *Either/Or* presents the reader with a choice between two approaches to life. There are no standards or guidelines which indicate how to choose. The reasons for choosing an ethical way of life over the aesthetic only make sense if one is already committed to an ethical way of life. Suggesting the aesthetic approach

as evil implies one has already accepted the idea that there is a good/evil distinction to be made. Likewise, choosing an aesthetic way of life only appeals to the aesthete, ruling Judge Vilhelm's ethics as inconsequential and preferring the pleasures of seduction. Thus, existentialists see Victor Eremita as presenting a radical choice in which no pre-ordained value can be discerned. One must choose, and through one's choices, one creates what one is.^[2]

However, the aesthetic and the ethical ways of life are not the only ways of living. Kierkegaard continues to flesh out other stages in further works, and the *Stages on Life's Way* is considered a direct sequel to *Either/Or*. However, it is not the same as *Either/Or* as he points out in *Concluding Postscript* in 1846.

In connection with Tivoli entertainments and literary New Year's presents it hold trues for the catch-penny artists and those who are caught by them, that variety is the highest law of life. But in connection with the truth as inwardness in existence, in connection with a more incorruptible joy of life, which has nothing in common with the craving of the life-weary for diversion, the opposite holds true; the law is: , the same and yet changed, and still the same. That is why lovers of Tivoli are so little interested in eternity, for it is the nature of eternity always to be the same, and the sobriety of the spirit is recognizable in the knowledge that a change in externalities is mere diversion, while change in the same is inwardness. But so curious, by and large, is the reading public, that an author who desires to get rid of it has merely to give a little hint, just a name, and it will say: it is the same. For otherwise the differences between the *Stages* and *Either/Or* are obvious enough. Not to speak of the fact that two-thirds of it is about as different as is categorically possible. The first two-thirds of the book, Victor Eremita, who was before simply an editor, is now transformed into an existing individual; Constantine and Johannes the Seducer have received a more profound characterization; the Judge is occupied with marriage from quite a different point of view than in *Either/Or*; while scarcely the most attentive reader will find a single expression, a single turn of thought or phrase, precisely as it was in *Either/Or*. Soren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, p. 254-255 translation by David F. Swenson and Walter Lowrie 1941, Princeton University Press

7.2 Christian Interpretation

The whole book can be viewed as the struggle individuals go through as they attempt to find meaning in their

lives. Victor Eremita bought a secretary (desk), which was something external, and said, “a new period of your life must begin with the acquisition of the secretary”.^[53] “A” desires the **absolute** highest. He can find no meaning in his life until he begins to study. He writes letters for the dead like the historians do. He’s trying to find God by studying the past as Hegel did. Don Juan seduces him away from God and Faust robs him of his innocent faith through the power of language. For him, **tautology** is the highest realm of **thought**.^[54] He’s someone who is in complete “conflict with his environment” because he is relating himself to externals.^[55]

“B” argues with “A”. He says **ethics** are the highest. “A” wants to remain a mystery to himself but “B” says it’s the meaning of life to become open to yourself. It’s more important to know yourself than historical persons. The more you know about yourself the more you can find your eternal validity. God will bless the most ethical person. Each one knows what’s best for the other but neither knows what’s best for himself.

Kierkegaard, speaking in the voice of the upbuilding discourse at the end, says they are both wrong. They’re both trying to find God in a childish way. Whatever they relate to in an external way will never make them happy or give them meaning. Art, science, dogma and ethics constantly change. We all want to be in the right and never in the wrong. Once we find what we desire we find that it wasn’t what we imagined it to be. So Kierkegaard says to leave it all to God.

How true **human nature** is to itself. With what native genius does not a little child often show us a living image of the greater relation. Today I really enjoyed watching little Louis. He sat in his little chair; he looked about him with apparent pleasure. The nurse Mary went through the room. “Mary,” he cried. “Yes, little Louis,” she answered with her usual friendliness, and came to him. He tipped his head a little to one side, fastened his immense eyes upon her with a certain gleam of mischief in them, and thereupon said quite phlegmatically, “Not this Mary, another Mary.” What about us older folk? We cry out to the whole world, and when it comes smiling to meet us, then we say: “This is not the Mary.” *Either/Or I*, Swenson, p. 34-35

Father in heaven! Teach us to pray rightly so that our hearts may open up to you in prayer and supplication and hide no furtive desire that we know is not acceptable to you, nor any secret fear that you will deny us anything that will truly be for our good, so that the labouring thoughts, the restless mind, the fearful heart may find rest in and through that alone in which and through which it can be found-by always

joyfully thanking you as we gladly confess that in relation to you we are always in the wrong. Amen. *Either/Or Part II*, p. 341^[56]

The three spheres of **existence** were neatly summed up in his **Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments**.

There are three existence spheres: the esthetic, the ethical, the religious. To these there is receptively corresponding border territory: irony is the border territory between the esthetic and the ethical; humor is the confinium (border territory) between the ethical and the religious. Irony emerges by continually joining the particulars of the finite with the ethical infinite requirement and allowing the contradiction to come into existence. ... Irony is the unity of ethical passion, which in inwardness infinitely accentuates one’s own I in relation to the ethical requirement-and culture, which in externality infinitely abstracts from the personal I as a finitude included among all other finitudes and particulars. An effect of this abstraction is that no one notices the first, and this is precisely the art, and through it the true infinitizing of the first is conditioned. (The desperate attempt of the miscarried Hegelian ethics to make the state into the court of last resort of ethics is a highly unethical attempt to finitize individuals, an unethical flight from the category of individuality to the category of the race. The ethicist in *Either/Or* has already protested against this directly and indirectly, indirectly at the end of the essay on the balance between the esthetic and the ethical in the personality where he himself must make a concession with regard to the religious, and again at the end of the article on Marriage (in *Stages*), where, even on the basis of the ethics he champions, which is diametrically opposite to **Hegelian ethics**,^[57] he certainly jacks up the price of the religious as high as possible but still makes room for it. *Note p. 503*) Most people live in the opposite way. They are busy with being something when someone is watching them. If possible, they are something in their own eyes as soon as others are watching them, but inwardly, where the absolute requirement is watching them, they have no taste for accentuating the personal I. Irony is the cultivation of the spirit and therefore follows next after immediacy; then comes the ethicist, then the humorist, then the religious person. p.501-504

7.3 Kantian interpretation

A recent way to interpret *Either/Or* is to read it as an applied Kantian text. Scholars for this interpretation include Alasdair MacIntyre^[58] and Ronald M. Green.^[59] In *After Virtue*, MacIntyre claims Kierkegaard is continuing the Enlightenment project set forward by Hume and Kant.^[60] Green notes several points of contact with Kant in *Either/Or*.^[61]

However, other scholars think Kierkegaard adopts Kantian themes in order to criticize them,^[58] while yet others think that although Kierkegaard adopts some Kantian themes, their final ethical positions are substantially different. George Stack argues for this latter interpretation, writing, “Despite the occasional echoes of Kantian sentiments in Kierkegaard’s writings (especially in *Either/Or*), the bifurcation between his ethics of self-becoming and Kant’s formalistic, meta-empirical ethics is, *mutatis mutandis*, complete ... Since radical individuation, specificity, inwardness, and the development of subjectivity are central to Kierkegaard’s existential ethics, it is clear, essentially, that the spirit and intention of his practical ethics is divorced from the formalism of Kant.”^[62]

7.4 Biographical interpretation



Regine Olsen, a muse for Kierkegaard's writings.

From a purely literary and historical point of view, *Either/Or* can be seen as a thinly veiled autobiography of the events between Kierkegaard and his ex-fiancée Regine Olsen. Johannes the Seducer in *The Diary of a Seducer* treats the object of his affection, Cordelia, much as

Kierkegaard treats Regine: befriending her family, asking her to marry him, and breaking off the engagement.^[63] *Either/Or*, then, could be the poetic and literary expression of Kierkegaard’s decision between a life of sensual pleasure, as he had experienced in his youth, or a possibility of marriage and what social responsibilities marriage might or ought to entail.^[62] Ultimately however, *Either/Or* stands philosophically independent of its relation to Kierkegaard’s life.^[64]

Yet, Kierkegaard was concerned about Regine because she tended to assume the life-view of characters she saw in the plays of Shakespeare at the theater. One day she would be “Beatrice in *Much Ado about Nothing*”^[65] and another Juliet.^[66] He thought this to be a difficulty she needed to surpass and diagnosed^[67] both her and himself like this in *Stages on Life’s Way* (1845).

No, what she will be healed by is a life-wisdom permeated with a certain religiousness, a not exactly unbeautiful compound of something of the esthetic, of the religious, and of a life-philosophy. My view of life is a different one, and I force myself to the best of my ability to hold my life to the category and hold it firmly. This is what I will; this is what I ask of anyone I am to admire, of anyone I am really to approve—that during the day he think only of the category of his life and dream about it at night. I judge no one; anyone busily engaged in judging others in *concreto* rarely remains true to the category. It is the same as with the person who seeks in someone else’s testimony a proof that he is earnest; he is *eo ipso* not in earnest, for earnestness is first and foremost positive confidence, in oneself. But every existence that wills something thereby indirectly judges, and the person who wills the category indirectly judges him who does not will. I also know that even if a person has only one step left to take he may stumble and relinquish his category; but I do not believe that I would therefore escape from it and be rescued by nonsense; I believe that it would hold on to me and judge me, and in this judgment there would in turn be the category. Søren Kierkegaard, *Stages on Life’s Way*, Hong, p. 304-305

8 Reception

8.1 Early reception

Either/Or established Kierkegaard’s reputation as a respected author.^[68] Henriette Wulff, in a letter to Hans Christian Andersen, wrote, “Recently a book was published here with the title *Either/Or*! It is supposed to be quite strange, the first part full of Don Juanism, skepti-

cism, et cetera, and the second part toned down and conciliating, ending with a sermon that is said to be quite excellent. The whole book attracted much attention. It has not yet been discussed publicly by anyone, but it surely will be. It is actually supposed to be by a Kierkegaard who has adopted a pseudonym....”^[68]



Johan Ludvig Heiberg (1791-1860)

Johan Ludvig Heiberg, a prominent Hegelian, at first criticized the aesthetic section, *Either* (Part I), then he had much better things to say about *Or*, Part II.^[69] Julie Watkin said “Kierkegaard replied to Heiberg in *The Fatherland* as Victor Eremita, blaming Heiberg for not reading the preface to *Either/Or* which would have given him the key to the work.”^[70] Kierkegaard later used his book *Prefaces* to publicly respond to Heiberg and Hegelianism.^[71] He also published a short article, *Who is the Author of Either/Or?*, a week after the publication of *Either/Or* itself.^[72]

In 1886 Georg Brandes compared *Either/Or* with Frederik Paludan-Müller’s *Kalanus* in *Eminent Authors of the Nineteenth Century*, which was translated into English at that time. Later, in 1906, he compared Kierkegaard’s *Diary of the Seducer* with Rousseau’s *Julie, or the New Heloise* and with Goethe’s *Sorrows of Young Werther*. He also compared *Either/Or* to Henrik Ibsen’s *Brand* but Edmund Gosse disagreed with him.^[73]

Next to *Adam Homo*, the most interesting work of Paludan-Müller is *Kalanus*. It is the positive expression of his ideal, as *Adam Homo* is the negative. Nowhere is his intellectual tendency more akin

to the negative bent of his great contemporary Kierkegaard than in this work. The problem which *Kalanus* endeavors to solve is precisely the same as the one whose solution Kierkegaard attacked in his *Either-Or* (Enten-Eller), namely, that of contrasting two personalities, one of whom is the direct representative of innate genius, of the pleasure-loving, extremely energetic view of life; and the other the incarnation of ethical profundity and moral grandeur, allowing them to struggle and contend, and convincing the reader of the decisive defeat of the purely natural views of life. With Kierkegaard the two opposing modes of contemplation of life are represented by a follower of aesthetics, and a judge of the supreme court, with Paludan-Müller by celebrated names in history; no less a man than the conqueror of the world, Alexander the Great, represents in *Kalanus* the aesthetic view of life, and the opponent allotted to him is the philosopher Kalanus. The ideal situation in the presentation of the intellectual wrestling-match of this sort would be that the author should succeed in equipping the contending parties with an equal degree of excellency. The actual situation, in this case, is that with Kierkegaard the representative of aesthetics is lavishly endowed with intellectual gifts, while the endowments of the representative of ethics, on the other hand, appear somewhat wooden and weak; and that with Paludan-Müller, on the contrary, the representative of ethics is no less intellectual than inspired, a man of the purest spiritual beauty, while the great Alexander is not placed upon the pinnacle of his historic fame.^[74]

A third significant feature in [Rousseau’s] *La Nouvelle Heloise* is that, just as we have passion in place of gallantry and inequality of station in place of similarity of rank, we have also the moral conviction of the sanctity of marriage in place of that honour grounded on aristocratic pride and self-respect, which stood for virtue

in fashionable literature. This word, Virtue, little in vogue until now, became with Rousseau and his school a watchword which was in perfect harmony with their other watchword, Nature; for to Rousseau virtue was a natural condition. Following the example of society, French literature had been making merry at the expense of marriage; Rousseau, therefore, defied the spirit of the times by writing a book in its honour. His heroine returns the passion of her lover, but marries another, to whom she remains faithful. Here, as in Werther the lover proper loses the maiden, who is wedded to a Monsieur Wolmar (the Albert of Werther and the Edward of Kierkegaard's Diary of a Seducer), a man as irreproachable as he is uninteresting. The moral conviction which is vindicated and glorified in Rousseau as Virtue, is the same as that which in Chateaubriand, under the influence of the religious reaction, takes the form of a binding religious vow. Georg Morris Cohen Brandes, *Main Currents in Nineteenth Century Literature Vol. 1* (1906), p. 16-17

Kierkegaard later referred to his concept of choosing yourself as the single individual in *The Concept of Anxiety*, June 17, 1844, and then in his *Four Upbuilding Discourses*, August 31, 1844, and once again in *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits*, 1847. William James echoed Kierkegaard in his lecture on *The Sick Soul* where he wrote, "the man must die to an unreal life before he can be born into the real life."^[75]

You are outside yourself and therefore cannot do without the other as opposition; you believe that only a restless spirit is alive, and all who are experienced believe that only a quiet spirit is truly alive. For you a turbulent sea is a symbol of life; for me it is the quiet, deep water. *Either/Or Part II* p. 144, Hong

Anxiety is a qualification of dreaming spirit, and as such it has its place in psychology. Awake, the difference between myself and my other is posited; sleeping, it is suspended; **dreaming**, it is an intimated nothing. The actuality of the spirit constantly shows itself as

a form that tempts its possibility but disappears as soon as it seeks to grasp for it, and it is a **nothing** that can only bring anxiety. More it cannot do as long as it merely shows itself. The concept of **anxiety** is almost never treated in psychology. Therefore, I must point out that it is altogether different from **fear** and similar concepts that refer to something definite, whereas **anxiety** is **freedom's actuality as the possibility of possibility**. For this reason, anxiety is not found in the beast, precisely because by nature the beast is not qualified as **spirit**. *The Concept of Anxiety*, Nichol p. 42

Now he discovers that the self he chooses has a boundless multiplicity within itself inasmuch as it has a history, a history in which he acknowledges identity with himself. This history is of a different kind, for in this history he stands in relation to other individuals in the race, and to the whole race, and this history contains painful things, and yet he is the person he is only through this history. That is why it takes courage to choose oneself, for at the same time as he seems to be isolating himself most radically he is most radically sinking himself into the root by which he is bound up with the whole. This makes him uneasy, and yet it must be so, for when the passion of freedom is aroused in him-and it is aroused in the choice just as it presupposes itself in the choice-he chooses himself and struggles for this possession as for his salvation, and it is his salvation. *Either/Or Part II*, Hong, p. 216

When a person turns and faces himself in order to understand himself, he steps, as it were, in the way of that first self, halts that which was turned outward in hankering for and seeking after the surrounding world that is its object, and summons it back from the external. In order to prompt the first self to this withdrawal, the deeper self lets the surrounding world remain what it is-remain dubious. This

is indeed the way it is; the world around us is inconstant and can be changed into the opposite at any moment, and there is not one person who can force this change by his own might or by the conjuration of his wish. The deeper self now shapes the deceitful flexibility of the surrounding world in such a way that it is no longer attractive to the first self. Then the first self either must proceed to kill the deeper self, to render it forgotten, whereby the whole matter is given up; or it must admit that the deeper self is right, because to want to predicate constancy of something that continually changes is indeed a contradiction, and as soon as one confesses that it changes, it can of course, change in that same moment. However much that first self shrinks from this, there is no word-smith so ingenious or no thought-twister so wily that he can invalidate the deeper self's eternal claim. There is only one way out, and that is to silence the deeper self by letting the roar of inconstancy drown it out. *Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses*, 1845, Hong translation, p. 314

Just as a man changes his clothes for celebration, so a person preparing for the holy act of **confession** is inwardly changed. It is indeed like changing one's clothes to divest oneself of multiplicity in order to make up one's mind about one thing, to interrupt the pace of busy activity in order to put on the repose of contemplation in unity with oneself. And this unity with oneself is the celebration's simple festive dress that is the condition of admittance. *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits*, Søren Kierkegaard, 1847, Hong, p. 19

If a person whose life has been tried in some crucial difficulty has a friend and sometime later he is unable to retain the past clearly, if anxiety creates confusion, and if accusing thoughts assail him with all their might as he works his way back, then he may go to his friend and say, "My soul is sick so that nothing will become clear to me, but I confided everything to you; you remember it, so please explain the past to me again." But if a person has no friend, he presumably goes to God if under other circumstances he has confided something to him, if in the hour of decision he called

God as witness when no one understood him. And the one who went to his friend perhaps was not understood at times, perhaps was filled with self-loathing, which is even more oppressive, upon discovering that the one to whom he had confided his troubles had not understood him at all, even though he had listened, had not sensed what was making him anxious, but had only an inquisitive interest in his unusual encounter with life. But this would never happen with God; who would dare to venture to think this of God, even if he is cowardly enough to prefer to forget God-until he stands face-to-face with the judge, who passes judgment on him but not on the one who truly has God as a witness, because where God is the judge, there is indeed no judge if God is the witness. It by no means follows that a person's life becomes easy because he learns to know God in this way. On the contrary, it can become very hard; it may become more difficult than the contemptible easiness of sensate human life, but in this difficulty life also acquires ever deeper and deeper meaning. Søren Kierkegaard, *Four Upbuilding Discourses* August 31, 1844 (*Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses* p. 324)



August Strindberg (1849-1910)

August Strindberg was familiar with *Either/Or* and this

book made him “forever a champion of the ethical as juxtaposed to the aesthetic life conception and he always remained faithful to the idea that **art** and **knowledge** must be **subservient** to life, and that life itself must be lived as we know best, chiefly because we are part of it and cannot escape from its promptings.”^[76] Strindberg was obviously attracted to *Either/Or Part II* where Kierkegaard developed his **categorical imperative**. He wrote the following in *Growth of a Soul* published posthumously in 1913 about Kierkegaard’s *Either—Or*: “it was valid only for the priests who called themselves Christians and the seducer and *Don Juan* were the author himself, who satisfied his desires in imagination”. Part II was his “Discourse on Life as a Duty, and when he reached the end of the work he found the moral philosopher in despair, and that all this teaching about duty had only produced a **Philistine**.” He then states that Kierkegaard’s **discourses** might have led him closer to Christianity but he didn’t know if he could come back to something “which had been torn out, and joyfully thrown into the fire”. However after reading the book he “felt sinful”. Then another writer began to influence his life.^[77]

This is how he described *Either/Or*:

But another element now entered into his life, and had a decided influence both on his views of things and his work. This was his acquaintance with two men,—an author and a remarkable personality. Unfortunately they were both abnormal and therefore had only a disturbing effect upon his development. The author was Kierkegaard, whose book, *Either—Or*, John had borrowed from a member of the Song Club, and read with **fear and trembling**. His friends had also read it as a work of genius, had admired the style, but not been specially influenced by it,—a proof that books have little effect, when they do not find readers in sympathy with the author. But upon John the book made the impression intended by the author. He read the first part containing “The Confessions of an Esthete.” He felt sometimes carried away by it, but always had an uncomfortable feeling as though present at a sick-bed. The perusal of the first part left a feeling of emptiness and despair behind it. The book agitated him. “The Diary of a Seducer” he regarded as the fancies of an unclean imagination. Things were not like that in real life. Moreover John was no sybarite, but on the contrary inclined to asceticism and self-torment. Such egotistic sensuality as that of the hero of Kierkegaard’s work was absurd because the suffering he caused by the satisfaction of his desires necessarily involved him in suffering and, therefore, defeated his object.

The second part of the work containing the philosopher’s “Discourse on Life as a Duty,”

made a deeper impression on John. It showed him that he himself was an “esthete” who had conceived of authorship as a form of enjoyment. Kierkegaard said that it should be regarded as a calling. Why? The proof was wanting, and John, who did not know that Kierkegaard was a Christian, but thought the contrary, not having seen his *Edifying Discourses*, imbibed unaware the Christian system of ethics with its doctrine of self-sacrifice and duty. Along with these the idea of sin returned. Enjoyment was a sin, and one had to do one’s duty. Why? Was it for the sake of society to which one was under obligations? No! merely because it was duty. That was simply Kant’s categorical imperative. When he reached the end of the work *Either—Or* and found the moral philosopher also in despair, and that all this teaching about duty had only produced a Philistine, he felt broken in two. “Then,” he thought, “better be an esthete.” But one cannot be an esthete if one has been a Christian for five-sixths of one’s life, and one cannot be moral without Christ. Thus he was tossed to and fro like a ball between the two, and ended in sheer **despair**. August Strindberg, *Growth of a Soul*, 165-166

Kierkegaard put an end to his own **double-mindedness** about devoting himself completely to aesthetics or developing a balance between the aesthetic and the ethical and going on to an ethical/Christian religious existence^[78] in the first part of his authorship (1843-1846) and then described what he had learned about himself and about being a Christian beginning with *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits* (1847). He learned to choose^[79] his own *Either/Or*.

each man who is **mindful** of himself knows what no science knows, since he knows who he himself is. Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety* 1844, Nichol p. 78-79

even the lowliest individual has a double existence. He, too has a history, and this is not simply a product of his own free acts. The interior deed, on the other hand, belongs to him and will belong to him forever; history or world history cannot take it from him; it follows him, either to his joy or to his despair. In this world there rules an absolute *Either/Or*. But philosophy has nothing to do with this world. Judge Vilhelm, *Either/Or II* p. 174-175 Hong 1987

8.2 Later reception

Although *Either/Or* was Kierkegaard’s first major book, it was one of his last books to be translated into English,

as late as 1944.^[80] Frederick DeW. Bolman, Jr. insisted that reviewers consider the book in this way: “In general, we have a right to discover, if we can, the meaning of a work as comprehensive as *Either/Or*, considering it upon its own merits and not reducing the meaning so as to fit into the author’s later perspective. It occurred to me that this was a service to understanding Kierkegaard, whose esthetic and ethical insights have been much slighted by those enamored of his religion of renunciation and transcendence. ... Kierkegaard’s brilliance seems to me to be showing that while goodness, truth, and beauty can not speculatively be derived one from another, yet these three are integrally related in the dynamics of a healthy character structure”.^[81]

Thomas Henry Croxall was impressed by ‘As thoughts on music in the essay, “*The Immediate Stages of the Erotic, or Musical Erotic*”. Croxall argues that “the essay should be taken seriously by a musician, because it makes one think, and think hard enough to straighten many of one’s ideas; ideas, I mean, not only on art, but on life” and goes on to discuss the psychological, existential, and musical value of the work.’^[82]

Johannes Edouard Hohlenberg wrote a biography about Søren Kierkegaard in 1954 and in that book he speculated that the *Diary of the Seducer* was meant to depict the life of P.L. Moller who later (1845) wrote the articles in *The Corsair* detrimental to the character of Kierkegaard.^[83] The *Diary of a Seducer* by itself, is a provocative novella, and has been reproduced separately from *Either/Or* several times.^{[84][85][86][87]} John Updike said of the *Diary*, “In the vast literature of love, *The Seducer’s Diary* is an intricate curiosity – a feverishly intellectual attempt to reconstruct an erotic failure as a pedagogic success, a wound masked as a boast”.^[87]

Many authors were interested in separating the esthetic, the ethical and the religious but it may have been, as far as Kierkegaard was concerned, of more importance for the single individual to have a way to decide when one was becoming dominant over the other two. Henrik Stangerup, (1937-1998) a Danish writer, wrote three books as a way to illustrate Kierkegaard’s three stages of existence, 1981, *The Road to Lagoa Santa*, which was about Kierkegaard’s brother-in-law Peter Wilhelm Lund (the ethicist), 1985 *The Seducer: It Is Hard to Die in Dieppe*, Peder Ludvig Moller was the esthetic in that novel, and in 1991 *Brother Jacob* which describes Søren Kierkegaard as a Franciscan monk.^[88]

In contemporary times, *Either/Or* received new life as a grand philosophical work with the publication of Alasdair MacIntyre’s *After Virtue* (1981), where MacIntyre situates *Either/Or* as an attempt to capture the Enlightenment spirit set forth by David Hume and Immanuel Kant. *After Virtue* renewed *Either/Or* as an important ethical text in the Kantian vein, as mentioned previously. Although MacIntyre accuses Victor Eremita of failing to provide a criterion for one to adopt an ethical way of life, many

scholars have since replied to MacIntyre’s accusation in *Kierkegaard After MacIntyre*.^{[58][89]}

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- [9] Fichte (1762-1814) wrote against philosophy as a science in his books *The Science of Rights* and *The Science of Knowledge*
- [10] *The Science of Knowledge* p. 70-75
- [11] “Hegel’s Science of Logic”. Marxists.org. Retrieved 2011-12-27.
- [12] “From this it is evident that the law of identity itself, and still more the law of contradiction, is not merely of analytic but of synthetic nature. For the latter contains in its expression not merely empty, simple equality-with-self, and not merely the other

of this in general, but, what is more, absolute inequality, contradiction per se. But as has been shown, the law of identity itself contains the movement of reflection, identity as a vanishing of otherness. What emerges from this consideration is, therefore, first, that the law of identity or of contradiction which purports to express merely abstract identity in contrast to difference as a truth, is not a law of thought, but rather the opposite of it; secondly, that these laws contain more than is meant by them, to wit, this opposite, absolute difference itself."

Hegel's Remarks § 883 & 884

- [13] "The law of the excluded middle is also distinguished from the laws of identity and contradiction ... the latter of these asserted that there is nothing that is at once A and not-A. It implies that there is nothing that is neither A nor not-A, that there is not a third that is indifferent to the opposition. But in fact the third that is indifferent to the opposition is given in the law itself, namely, A itself is present in it. This A is neither +A nor -A, and is equally well +A as -A. The something that was supposed to be either -A or not A is therefore related to both +A and not-A; and again, in being related to A, it is supposed not to be related to not-A, nor to A, if it is related to not-A. The something itself, therefore, is the third which was supposed to be excluded. Since the opposite determinations in the something are just as much posited as sublated in this positing, the third which has here the form of a dead something, when taken more profoundly, is the unity of reflection into which the opposition withdraws as into ground."

Hegel's Remarks § 952-954

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- [26] 154-156 "Antigone's" "sorrow", 167-168 "grief", 177-178 "deception" which is for love an absolute paradox", 182ff the inability to decide if you've been deceived, 220-221 "unhappy consciousness"
- [27] See Søren Kierkegaard, *Stages on Life's Way*, Hong, p. 323-328
- [28] Eugene Scribe e-Notes
- [29] Eugene Scribe *The First Love*, Hathi Trust
- [30] *Either/Or Part I*, Swenson, p. 253
- [31] *Stages on Life's Way*, Hong, p. 71ff
- [32] Victor Eremita's speech begins on p. 56 (*Stages on Life's Way*) The Young Man speaks as well as the Fashion Designer
- [33] *Stages on Life's Way*, Hong, p. 73
- [34] Kierkegaard repeats this theme often in his writings. The third section of *Stages on Life's Way* (1845) Hong p. 185ff, *Guilty? Not Guilty?*, is about a person who can never discover or accept his or her own guilt and the fourth section of *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits* (1847), **The Joy of It That in Relation to God a Person Always Suffers as Guilty** Hong p. 265-288, is about the person who "with joy" discovers his or her own guilt and that God still loves him or her.
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